

The Cambridge Companion to
LEVINAS

Edited by Simon Critchley
University of Essex

and Robert Bernasconi
University of Memphis



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1 Introduction

One might speculate about the possibility of writing a history of French philosophy in the twentieth century as a philosophical biography of Emmanuel Levinas. He was born in 1906 in Lithuania and died in Paris in 1995. Levinas's life-span therefore traverses and connects many of the intellectual movements of the twentieth century and intersects with some of its major historical events, its moments of light as well as its point of absolute darkness – Levinas said that his life had been dominated by the memory of the Nazi horror (*DF* 291).¹

The history of French philosophy in the twentieth century can be described as a succession of trends and movements, from the neo-Kantianism that was hegemonic in the early decades of the twentieth century, through to the Bergsonism that was very influential until the 1930s, Kojève's Hegelianism in the 1930s, phenomenology in the 1930s and 1940s, existentialism in the post-war period, structuralism in the 1950s and 1960s, post-structuralism in the 1960s and 1970s, and the return to ethics and political philosophy in the 1980s. Levinas was present throughout all these developments, and was either influenced by them or influenced their reception in France.

Yet Levinas's presence in many of these movements is rather fleeting, indeed at times shadowy. It is widely agreed that Levinas was largely responsible for the introduction of Husserl and Heidegger in France, philosophers who were absolutely decisive for following generations of philosophers, if only in the opposition they provoked. Levinas even jokingly suggested that his place in philosophical immortality was assured by the fact that his doctoral thesis on Husserl had introduced the young Jean-Paul Sartre to phenomenology.² However, for a variety of reasons – a certain reticence, even diffidence, on Levinas's part, his professional position outside the French

university system until 1964, and his captivity in the *Stalag* between 1940 and 1945 – Levinas's work made little impression prior to the publication of *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, and not much immediately after it. In the exuberance of the *libération*, and the successive dominance of existentialism, phenomenology, Marxism, psychoanalysis and structuralism on the French scene, Levinas's work played in a minor key, where he was known – if at all – as a specialist and scholar of Husserl and Heidegger. As can be seen from his 1963 collection, *Difficult Freedom*, in the 1950s and after Levinas was much more influential in Jewish affairs in France than in philosophy.

Indeed, even after the appearance of *Totality and Infinity*, apart from some rich, if oblique, texts by Levinas's lifelong friend Maurice Blanchot, the first serious and extensive philosophical study of Levinas's work was by a then 34-year-old philosopher, relatively unknown outside scholarly circles, called Jacques Derrida.³ First published in 1964, nothing remotely comparable to Derrida's brilliant essay, 'Violence and Metaphysics', was published on Levinas during the next decade. A measure of the obscurity enjoyed by Levinas's work can be seen from the fact that in Vincent Descombes's otherwise excellent presentation of the history of philosophy in France during the period 1933–77, published in 1979, Levinas is barely even mentioned.⁴ How is it, then, that Jean-Luc Marion, Professor of Philosophy at the Sorbonne (Paris IV), was able to write in an obsequy from February 1996, 'If one defines a great philosopher as someone without whom philosophy would not have been what it is, then in France there are two great philosophers of the twentieth century: Bergson and Levinas'?'⁵

The situation began to change, and change rapidly, from the early to the mid-1980s. The reasons for this are various. First and foremost, the word 'ethics', which had either been absent from intellectual discussion, or present simply as a term of abuse reserved for the bourgeoisie in the radical anti-humanism of the 1970s, once again became acceptable. The collapse of revolutionary Marxism, from its short-lived structuralist hegemony in Althusser, to the Maoist delusions of the *Tel Quel* group, occasioned the rise of the so-called *nouveaux philosophes*, André Glucksmann, Alain Finkielkraut and Bernard Henri-Lévy, who were critical of the enthusiastic political myopia of the 1968 generation. Although the debt that philosophical posterity

will have to the latter thinkers is rather uncertain, by the early 1980s questions of ethics, politics, law and democracy were back on the philosophical and cultural agenda and the scene was set for a reappraisal of Levinas's work. A convenient landmark is provided by the radio interviews with Philippe Nemo that were broadcast on France Culture and published in 1982 as *Ethics and Infinity*. Another crucial event in the reception of Levinas was the Heidegger affair of the winter of 1986–7, which was occasioned by the publication of Victor Farias's *Heidegger and Nazism* and new revelations about the extent of Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism. This affair is significant because much of the criticism of Heidegger was also, indirectly, a criticism of the alleged moral and political impoverishment of the thinking he inspired, in particular that of Derrida. The alleged ethical turn of Derrida's thinking might be viewed simply as a return to Levinas, one of the major influences on the development of his thinking, as is amply evidenced by the 1964 essay.

The renewed interest in Levinas can also be linked to two other factors on the French scene: a return to phenomenology that begins in the 1980s and which gains pace in the 1990s, and a renewal of interest in religious themes. These two factors might be said to come together in what Dominique Janicaud has diagnosed as a theological turn in French phenomenology, evidenced in different ways in the work of Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Louis Chrétien.⁶ By the mid to late 1980s, Levinas's major philosophical works, which hitherto had only been available in the handsome, yet expensive, volumes published by Martinus Nijhoff in Holland and Fata Morgana in Montpellier, were beginning to be reissued in cheap *livre de poche* editions. *En bref*, Levinas begins to be widely read in France for the first time.

Another highly significant factor in the contemporary fascination for Levinas's work is its reception outside France. A glance at Roger Burggraeve's helpful bibliography of Levinas confirms the fact that the first serious reception of Levinas's work in academic circles took place in Belgium and Holland, with the work of philosophers like Alphonse de Waelhens, H. J. Adriaanse, Theodore de Boer, Adriaan Peperzak, Stephen Strasser, Jan De Greef, Sam IJselling and Jacques Taminioux.⁷ It is perhaps ironic that Levinas is first taken up by Christian philosophers, whether Protestants like De Boer, or Catholics like Peperzak.⁸ The first honorary doctorates presented to

Levinas were from the Jesuit faculty of Loyola University Chicago in 1970, the Protestant theologians of the university of Leiden in 1975 and the Catholic University of Leuven in 1976. In Italy, from 1969 onwards, Levinas was a regular participant in meetings in Rome organized by Enrico Castelli, which often dealt with religious themes. Also, in 1983 and 1985, after meeting with the Pope briefly on the occasion of his visit to Paris in May 1980, Levinas, along with other philosophers, attended the conferences held at the Castel Gandolfo at which the Pope presided. The positive German reception of Levinas, with the notable exception of phenomenologists like Bernhard Waldenfels and critical theorists like Axel Honneth, was largely thanks to Freiburg Catholic theologians such as Ludwig Wenzler and Bernhard Caspar, and has obviously been dominated by the question of German guilt for the *Shoah*.

The vicissitudes of the Anglo-American reception of Levinas might also be mentioned in this connection. The reception begins in the Catholic universities in the USA, many of which enjoyed strong connections with the Dutch and Belgium Catholic academic milieu such as Duquesne University and Loyola University Chicago. But Levinas was also being read from the early 1970s onwards in Continental philosophy circles in non-Catholic universities such as Northwestern, Pennsylvania State and the State University of New York (Stonybrook), which produced Levinas scholars such as Richard A. Cohen. The first book-length study of Levinas in English was by Edith Wyschogrod from 1974, although it was published by Nijhoff in Holland.⁹ As an undergraduate at the University of Essex in the 1980s, I was introduced to Levinas's work by my present co-editor, as were many others, such as Tina Chanter. At that time, one had the impression that an interest in Levinas was a passion shared by a handful of initiates and rare senior figures such as John Llewelyn, Alan Montefiore or David Wood. It is fair to say that in the English-speaking world many people came to Levinas through the astonishing popularity of the work of Derrida. The turn to Levinas was motivated by the question of whether deconstruction, in its Derridian or De Manian versions, had any ethical status, which in its turn was linked to a widespread renewal of interest in the place of ethics in literary studies.¹⁰

Although Levinas could hardly be so described, another influential strand of the Anglo-American reception of his work has

been feminist, in the work of scholars such as Noreen O'Connor, Tina Chanter, Jill Robbins and younger philosophers such as Stella Sandford.¹¹ They were in turn inspired by the early work of Catherine Chaliel on figures of femininity in Levinas and Judaism, and also by Luce Irigaray's commentaries on Levinas in the context of discussions of the ethics of sexual difference.¹² Levinas was introduced to sociology through the pathbreaking work of Zygmunt Bauman and his influence is felt in the work of Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy.¹³ For good or ill, Levinas has become an obligatory reference point in theoretical discussions across a whole range of disciplines: philosophy, theology, Jewish studies, aesthetics and art theory, social and political theory, international relations theory, pedagogy, psychotherapy and counselling, and nursing and medical practice.

As the theme of ethics has occupied an increasingly central place in the humanities and the social sciences, so Levinas's work has assumed an imposing profile. For example, Gary Gutting's excellent new history of French philosophy in the twentieth century, which supplants Descombes's on the Cambridge University Press list, concludes with a discussion of Levinas.¹⁴ There is now a veritable flood of work on Levinas in a huge range of languages, and his work has been well translated into English. The more recent translations of Levinas build on the work of Alphonso Lingis, Levinas's first and best-known English translator. Indeed, in many ways it now looks as if Levinas were the hidden king of twentieth-century French philosophy. Such are the pleasing ironies of history.

It is a reflection of Levinas's growing importance that philosophers with a background in analytic philosophy and American pragmatism such as Hilary W. Putnam, Richard J. Bernstein or Stanley Cavell, should be taking up Levinas.¹⁵ Even someone like Richard Rorty, although deeply hostile to the rigours of infinite responsibility, which he calls a 'nuisance', now feels obliged to refute him.¹⁶ It is our hope that this Cambridge Companion will consolidate, deepen and accelerate the reception of Levinas in the English-speaking world and along its edges. In the selection of essays, we have sought a balance between the more usual phenomenological or Continental approaches to Levinas's work and more analytic approaches, the ambition being to shun that particular professional division of labour. Attention has also been paid to the significant consequences of Levinas's work for aesthetics, art and literature, and to representing

the specifically Judaic character of Levinas's work, both his concern for religious issues and his practice of Talmudic commentary.

LEVINAS'S BIG IDEA

Levinas's work, like that of any original thinker, is possessed of a great richness. It was influenced by many sources – non-philosophical and philosophical, as much by Levinas's Talmudic master Monsieur Chouchani as by Heidegger – and it deals with a wide and complex range of matters. Levinas's work provides powerful descriptions of a whole range of phenomena, both everyday banalities and those that one could describe with Bataille as 'limit-experiences': insomnia, fatigue, effort, sensuous enjoyment, erotic life, birth and the relation to death. Such phenomena are described with particularly memorable power by Levinas in the work published after the war: *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*.

However, despite its richness, once more like that of any great thinker, Levinas's work is dominated by one thought, and it seeks to think one thing under an often bewildering variety of aspects. Derrida, in an image that Richard Bernstein takes up later in this book, compares the movement of Levinas's thinking to that of a wave on a beach, always the same wave returning and repeating its movement with deeper insistence. Hilary Putnam, picking up on a more prosaic image from Isaiah Berlin, *via* Archilochus, compares Levinas to a hedgehog, who knows 'one big thing', rather than a fox, who knows 'many small things'. Levinas's one big thing is expressed in his thesis that ethics is first philosophy, where ethics is understood as a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person. My task in this introduction is to explain Levinas's big idea. Let me begin, however, with a remark on philosophical method.

In a discussion from 1975, Levinas said, 'I neither believe that there is transparency possible in method, nor that philosophy is possible as transparency' (*GCM* 143). Now, while the opacity of Levinas's prose troubles many of his readers, it cannot be said that his work is without method. Levinas always described himself as a phenomenologist and as being faithful to the spirit of Husserl (*OB* 183). What Levinas means by phenomenology is the Husserlian method of intentional analysis. Although there are various formulations of the meaning of

the latter in Levinas's work, the best definition remains that given in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*. He writes,

Intentional analysis is the search for the concrete. Notions held under the direct analysis of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naïve thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with meaning – such is the essential teaching of Husserl. [TI 28]

Thus, intentional analysis begins from the unreflective naïvety of what Husserl calls the natural attitude. Through the operation of the phenomenological reduction, it seeks to describe the deep structures of intentional life, structures which give meaning to that life, but which are forgotten in that naïvety. This is what phenomenology calls the concrete: not the empirical givens of sense data, but the *a priori* structures that give meaning to those seeming givens. As Levinas puts it, 'What counts is the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives' (TI 28). This is what Levinas meant when he used to say, as he apparently often did at the beginning of his lecture courses at the Sorbonne in the 1970s, that philosophy, 'c'est la science des naïvetés' ('it's the science of naïveties'). Philosophy is the work of reflection that is brought to bear on unreflective, everyday life. This is why Levinas insists that phenomenology constitutes a deduction, from the naïve to the scientific, from the empirical to the *a priori* and so forth. A phenomenologist seeks to pick out and analyse the common, shared features that underlie our everyday experience, to make explicit what is implicit in our ordinary social know-how. On this model, in my view, the philosopher, unlike the natural scientist, does not claim to be providing us with new knowledge or fresh discoveries, but rather with what Wittgenstein calls *reminders* of what we already know but continually pass over in our day-to-day life. Philosophy reminds us of what is passed over in the naïvety of what passes for common sense.

Mention of the spirit of Husserlian phenomenology is important since, from the time of his 1930 doctoral thesis onwards, Levinas could hardly be described as faithful to the letter of Husserl's texts. He variously criticized his former teacher for theoreticism, intellectualism and overlooking the existential density and historical embeddedness of lived experience. Levinas's critically appropriative relation to Husserl is discussed at length below by Rudolf Bernet, with

special reference to time-consciousness. If the fundamental axiom of phenomenology is the intentionality thesis, namely that all thought is fundamentally characterized by being directed towards its various matters, then Levinas's big idea about the ethical relation to the other person is not phenomenological, because the other is not given as a matter for thought or reflection. As Levinas makes clear in an essay from 1965, the other is not a phenomenon but an enigma, something ultimately refractory to intentionality and opaque to the understanding.¹⁷ Therefore, Levinas maintains a methodological but not a substantive commitment to Husserlian phenomenology.

LEAVING THE CLIMATE OF HEIDEGGER'S THINKING

Levinas is usually associated with one thesis, namely the idea that *ethics is first philosophy*. But what exactly does he mean by that? The central task of Levinas's work, in his words, is the attempt to describe a relation with the other person that cannot be reduced to comprehension. He finds this in what he famously calls the 'face-to-face' relation. But let me try and unpack these slightly mysterious claims by considering his somewhat oedipal conflict with Heidegger, which is discussed by a number of contributors below, such as Gerald Bruns.

As is well known, Heidegger became politically committed to National Socialism, accepting the position of Rector of Freiburg University in the fateful year 1933. If one is to begin to grasp how traumatic Heidegger's commitment to National Socialism was to the young Levinas and how determinative it was for his future work, then one has to understand the extent to which Levinas was philosophically convinced by Heidegger. Between 1930 and 1932 Levinas planned to write a book on Heidegger, a project he abandoned in disbelief at Heidegger's actions in 1933. A fragment of the book was published in 1932 as 'Martin Heidegger and Ontology'.¹⁸ By 1934, at the request of the recently founded French left Catholic journal *Esprit*, Levinas had written a memorable meditation on the philosophy of what the editor, Emmanuel Mounier, called 'Hitlerism'.¹⁹ So if Levinas's life was dominated by the memory of the Nazi horror, then his philosophical life was animated by the question of how a philosopher as undeniably brilliant as Heidegger could have become a Nazi, for however short a time.

The philosophical kernel of Levinas's critique of Heidegger is most clearly stated in the important 1951 paper, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?'²⁰ Levinas here engages in a critical questioning of Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology, that is, his attempt to raise anew the question of the meaning of Being through an analysis of that being for whom Being is an issue: *Dasein* or the human being. In Heidegger's early work, ontology – which is what Aristotle called the science of Being as such or metaphysics – is fundamental, and *Dasein* is the fundament or condition of possibility for any ontology. What Heidegger seeks to do in *Being and Time*, once again in the spirit rather than the letter of Husserlian intentional analysis, is to identify the basic or *a priori* structures of *Dasein*. These structures are what Heidegger calls 'existentials', such as understanding, state-of-mind, discourse and falling. For Levinas, the basic advance and advantage of Heideggerian ontology over Husserlian phenomenology is that it begins from an analysis of the factual situation of the human being in everyday life, what Heidegger after Wilhelm Dilthey calls 'facticity'. The understanding or comprehension of Being (*Seinsverständnis*), which must be presupposed in order for Heidegger's investigation into the meaning of Being to be intelligible, does not presuppose a merely intellectual attitude, but rather the rich variety of intentional life – emotional and practical as well as theoretical – through which we relate to things, persons and the world.

There is here a fundamental agreement of Levinas with Heidegger which can already be found in his critique of Husserl in the conclusion to his 1930 doctoral thesis, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* and which is presupposed in all of Levinas's subsequent work. The essential contribution of Heideggerian ontology is its critique of intellectualism. Ontology is not, as it was for Aristotle, a contemplative theoretical endeavour, but is, according to Heidegger, grounded in a fundamental ontology of the existential engagement of human beings in the world, which forms the anthropological preparation for the question of Being. Levinas writes with reference to the phenomenological reduction, 'This is an act in which we consider life in all its concreteness but no longer live it' (*TIHP* 155). Levinas's version of phenomenology seeks to consider life as it is lived. The overall orientation of Levinas's early work might be summarized in another sentence from the opening pages of the

same book, 'Knowledge of Heidegger's starting point may allow us to understand better Husserl's end point' (*TIHP* xxxiv).

However, as some of the writings prior to the 1951 essay make clear (for example, the introduction to the 1947 book *Existence and Existents*), although Levinas's work is to a large extent inspired by Heidegger and by the conviction that we cannot put aside *Being and Time* for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian, it is also governed by what Levinas calls, 'the profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy' (*EE* 19). In a letter appended to the 1962 paper, 'Transcendence and Height', with an oblique but characteristic reference to Heidegger's political myopia, Levinas writes,

The poetry of the peaceful path that runs through fields does not reflect the splendour of Being beyond beings. The splendour brings with it more sombre and pitiless images. The declaration of the end of metaphysics is premature. The end is not at all certain. Besides, metaphysics – the relation with the being (*étant*) which is accomplished as ethics – precedes the understanding of Being and survives ontology. [*BPW* 31]

Levinas claims that *Dasein's* understanding of Being presupposes an ethical relation with the other human being, that being to whom I speak and to whom I am obliged before being comprehended. Fundamental ontology is fundamentally ethical. It is this ethical relation that Levinas, principally in *Totality and Infinity*, describes as metaphysical and which survives any declaration of the end of metaphysics.

Levinas's Heidegger is essentially the author of *Being and Time*, 'Heidegger's first and principal work', a work which, for Levinas, is the peer of the greatest books in the history of philosophy, regardless of Heidegger's politics (*CP* 52). Although Levinas clearly knew Heidegger's later work, much more than he liked to admit, he expresses little sympathy for it. In the important 1957 essay, 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity', the critique of Heidegger becomes yet more direct and polemical: 'In Heidegger, atheism is a paganism, the pre-Socratic texts are anti-Scriptures. Heidegger shows in what intoxication the lucid sobriety of philosophers is steeped' (*CP* 53).

'Is Ontology Fundamental?' demonstrates for the first time in Levinas's work the *ethical* significance of his critique of Heidegger. It is in this paper that the word 'ethics' first enters Levinas's philosophical

vocabulary. The importance of this essay for Levinas's subsequent work can be seen in the way in which its argumentation is alluded to and effectively repeated in crucial pages of *Totality and Infinity*.²¹ The central task of the essay is to describe a relation irreducible to comprehension, that is, irreducible to what Levinas sees as the *ontological* relation to others. Ontology is Levinas's general term for any relation to otherness that is reducible to comprehension or understanding. On this account, Husserl's phenomenology is therefore ontological because the intentionality thesis assumes a correlation between an intentional act and the object of that intention, or *noema* and *noesis* in the later work. Even the Heideggerian ontology that exceeds intellectualism is unable to describe this non-comprehensive relation because particular beings are always already understood upon the horizon of Being, even if this is, as Heidegger says at the beginning of *Being and Time*, a vague and average understanding. Levinas writes that *Being and Time* essentially advanced one thesis: 'Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being' (CP 52). Thus, despite the novelty of his work, Heidegger rejoins and sums up the great Platonic tradition of Western philosophy, where the relation to particular beings is always understood by way of mediation with a third term, whether universal form or *eidōs* in Plato, Spirit in Hegel or Being in Heidegger.

Yet how can a relation with a being be other than comprehension? Levinas's response is that it cannot, 'unless it is the other (*autrui*)' (BPW 6). *Autrui* is arguably the key term in all of Levinas's work and, in line with common French usage, it is Levinas's word for the human other, the other person. The claim here is that the relation with the other goes beyond comprehension, and that it does not affect us in terms of a theme (recall that Heidegger describes Being as 'thematic' in the early pages of *Being and Time*) or a concept. If the other person were reducible to the concept I have of him or her, then that would make the relation to the other a relation of knowledge or an epistemological feature. As the two allusions to Kant in 'Is Ontology Fundamental?' reveal – and this is something taken up by Paul Davies in his contribution to this volume – ethics is not reducible to epistemology, practical reason is not reducible to pure reason. As Levinas puts it in a discussion from the mid-1980s, ethics is otherwise than knowledge.²² Levinas revealingly writes, 'that which we catch sight of seems suggested by the practical philosophy of Kant, to which

we feel particularly close'.²³ To my mind, this suggests two possible points of agreement between Levinas and Kant, despite other obvious areas of disagreement such as the primacy of autonomy for Kant and Levinas's assertion of heteronomy as the basis for ethical experience. First, we might see Levinas's account of the ethical relation to the other person as an echo of Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative, namely respect for persons, where I should act in such a way as never to treat the other person as a means to an end, but rather as an end in him or herself.²⁴ Second, we should keep in mind that Kant concludes the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* by claiming the incomprehensibility of the moral law: 'And thus, while we do not comprehend the practical unconditioned necessity of the moral imperative, we do comprehend its *incomprehensibility*. This is all that can fairly be asked of a philosophy which presses forward in its principles to the very limit of human reason.'²⁵

For Levinas, this relation to the other irreducible to comprehension, what he calls the 'original relation' (*BPW* 6), takes place in the concrete situation of speech. Although Levinas's choice of terminology suggests otherwise, the face-to-face relation with the other is not a relation of perception or vision, but is always linguistic. The face is not something I see, but something I speak to. Furthermore, in speaking or calling or listening to the other, I am not reflecting upon the other, but I am actively and existentially engaged in a non-subsumptive relation, where I focus on the particular individual in front of me. I am not contemplating, I am conversing. It is this event of being in relation with the other as an act or a practice – which is variously and revealingly named in 'Is Ontology Fundamental?' as 'expression', 'invocation' and 'prayer' – that Levinas describes as 'ethical'. This leads to a significant insight: that Levinas does not posit, *a priori*, a conception of ethics that then instantiates itself (or does not) in certain concrete experiences. Rather, the ethical is an adjective that describes, *a posteriori* as it were, a certain event of being in a relation to the other irreducible to comprehension. It is the relation which is ethical, not an ethics that is instantiated in relations.

Some philosophers might be said to have a problem with other people. For a philosopher like Heidegger, the other person is just one of many: 'the they', the crowd, the mass, the herd. I know all about the other because the other is part of the mass that surrounds and suffocates me. On this picture, there is never anything absolutely

challenging, remarkable or even, in a word Levinas uses in his late work, traumatizing about the other person. The other might at best become my colleague, comrade or co-worker, but not the source of my compassion or the object of my admiration, fear or desire. Levinas's point is that unless our social interactions are underpinned by ethical relations to other persons, then the worst might happen, that is, the failure to acknowledge the humanity of the other. Such, for Levinas, is what took place in the *Shoah* and in the countless other disasters of this century, where the other person becomes a faceless face in the crowd, someone whom the passer-by simply passes by, someone whose life or death is for me a matter of indifference. As Levinas succinctly puts it in one of his last published interviews from *Le Monde* in 1992, 'The absence of concern for the other in Heidegger and his personal political adventure are linked'.²⁶

So, where Levinas puts ethics first, Heidegger puts them second. That is, the relation to the other person is only a moment in a philosophical investigation of which the ambition is the exploration of the basic question of philosophy, the question of Being. Of course, the danger in all this is that the philosopher risks losing sight of the other person in his or her quest for ontological truth. It is perhaps no accident that the history of Greek philosophy begins with Thales, who falls into a ditch because he would rather gaze at the starry heavens than at what is under his nose.

WHY TOTALITY? WHY INFINITY?

Levinas's first full-length systematic philosophical book, what Derrida calls 'the great work', is *Totality and Infinity*, which is discussed below by a number of contributors, especially Bernhard Waldenfels. Why does it have this title? For Levinas, all ontological relations to that which is other are relations of comprehension and form totalities. The claim is that if I conceive of the relation to the other in terms of understanding, correlation, symmetry, reciprocity, equality and even, as has once again become fashionable, recognition, then that relation is totalized. When I totalize, I conceive of the relation to the other from some imagined point that would be outside of it and I turn myself into a theoretical spectator on the social world of which I am really part, and in which I am an agent. Viewed from outside, intersubjectivity might appear to be a relation

between equals, but from inside that relation, as it takes place at this very moment, you place an obligation on me that makes you higher than me, more than my equal. It might be argued that much philosophy and social theory persistently totalizes relations with others. But for Levinas, there is no view from nowhere. Every view is from somewhere and the ethical relation is a description from the point of view of an agent in the social world and not a spectator upon it.

In the work of the later 1950s onwards, the ethical relation to the other is described by Levinas in terms of infinity. What does that mean? Levinas's claim is very simple, but even quite sophisticated readers still get it muddled. The idea is that the ethical relation to the other has a *formal* resemblance to the relation, in Descartes's Third Meditation, between the *res cogitans* and the infinity of God.²⁷ What interests Levinas in this moment of Descartes's argument is that the human subject has an idea of infinity, and that this idea, by definition, is a thought that contains more than can be thought. As Levinas puts it, in what is almost a mantra in his published work, 'In thinking infinity the I from the first *thinks more than it thinks*' (CP 54).

It is this formal structure of a thought that thinks more than it can think, that has a surplus within itself, that intrigues Levinas because it sketches the contours of a relation to something that is always in excess of whatever idea I may have of it, that always escapes me. The Cartesian picture of the relation of the *res cogitans* to God through the idea of the infinite provides Levinas with a picture or formal model of a relation between two terms that is based on height, inequality, non-reciprocity and asymmetry. However, Levinas is making no substantive claim at this point, he is not saying that I actually do possess the idea of the infinite in the way Descartes describes, nor is he claiming that the other is God, as some readers mistakenly continue to believe. As Putnam rightly points out below, 'It isn't that Levinas accepts Descartes's argument, so interpreted. The significance is rather that Levinas transforms the argument by substituting the other for God.'

As Levinas is a phenomenologist, it then becomes a question for him of trying to locate some concrete content for this formal structure. Levinas's major substantive claim, which resounds in different ways throughout his mature work, is that the ethical relation of the self to the other corresponds to this picture, concretely fulfilling

this model. One might say that the ethical relation to the face of the other person is the *social* expression of this formal structure. Levinas writes, 'the idea of infinity is the social relationship', and again, 'The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face' (CP 54; TI 50). Thus, the ethical relation to the other produces what Levinas calls, in a favourite formulation, rightly picked up by Blanchot, 'a curvature of intersubjective space', that can only be totalized by falsely imagining oneself occupying some God-like position outside of that relation (TI 291).

WHAT IS THE SAME? WHAT IS THE OTHER?

Ethics, for Levinas, takes place as the putting into question of the ego, the self, consciousness or what he calls, in the term that he borrows from Plato, the same (*le Même, to auton*). What is the same? It is important to note that the same refers not only to subjective thoughts, but also to the objects of those thoughts. In Husserlian terms, the domain of the same includes not only the intentional acts of consciousness, or *noeses*, but also the intentional objects which give meaning to those acts, or *noemata*. Again, in Heideggerian terms, the same refers not only to *Dasein*, but also to the world which is constitutive of the Being of *Dasein*, where the latter is defined as Being-in-the-world. So, the domain of the same maintains a relation with otherness, but it is a relation in which the ego or consciousness reduces the distance between the same and the other, in which, as Levinas puts it, their opposition fades (TI 126).

The same is therefore called into question by an other that cannot be reduced to the same, by something that escapes the cognitive power of the subject. The first time that Levinas employs the word 'ethics' in the text proper – excluding the preface – of *Totality and Infinity*, he defines it as 'the putting into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other (*Autrui*)' (TI 43). Ethics, for Levinas, is critique. It is the critical putting into question of the liberty, spontaneity and cognitive emprise of the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself. Ethics is the location of a point of otherness, or what Levinas calls 'exteriority', that cannot be reduced to the same. *Totality and Infinity* is subtitled 'An essay on exteriority'. In his brief autobiographical reflections, Levinas remarks 'Moral consciousness is not an experience of values, but an access to exterior being' (DF 293).

This exterior being is named 'face' by Levinas and is defined, bringing to mind what was said above about the notion of infinity, as 'the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*' (TI 50). In the language of transcendental philosophy, the face is the condition of possibility for ethics. Levinas makes a distinction between two forms of otherness, distinguished by *autre* and *autrui* in French, which are sometimes capitalized and sometimes not in Levinas's rather unsystematic prose style. *Autre* refers to anything which is other, this computer at which I am typing, the window panes and the buildings I can see across the street. *Autrui* is reserved for the other human being with whom I have an ethical relation, although it remains a moot point to what extent, if any, Levinasian ethics is capable of being extended to non-human beings, such as animals.²⁸

As well as being critique, Levinasian ethics bears a critical relation to the philosophical tradition. For Levinas, Western philosophy has most often been ontology, of which Heidegger's work is only the most recent example, and by which Levinas means any attempt to comprehend the Being of that which is. On this account, epistemology, in either its realist or idealist versions, is an ontology in so far as the object of cognition is an object *for* consciousness, an intuition that can be placed under a concept, whether that intuition is the empirical given of a sense-datum or is transcendently constituted by the categories of the understanding. For Levinas, the ontological event that defines and dominates the philosophical tradition from Parmenides to Heidegger consists in suppressing or reducing all forms of otherness by transmuting them into the same. In ontology, the other is assimilated to the same like so much food and drink – 'O digestive philosophy!', as Sartre exclaimed against French neo-Kantianism.²⁹ Taking up the analysis of separated existence in part II of *Totality and Infinity*, ontology is the movement of comprehension, which takes possession of things through the activity of labour, where conceptual labour resembles manual labour. Ontology is like the movement of the hand, the organ for grasping and seizing, which takes hold of (*prend*) and comprehends (*comprend*) things in a manipulation of otherness. In 'Transcendence and Height', Levinas outlines and criticizes this digestive philosophy, where the knowing ego is what he calls 'the melting pot' of Being, transmuting all otherness into itself. Philosophy is defined by Levinas as that alchemy whereby otherness

is transmuted into sameness by means of the philosopher's stone of the knowing ego.³⁰

WHAT IS THE SAYING? WHAT IS THE SAID?

For want of a better term, 'non-ontological philosophy' would consist in the resistance of the other to the same, a resistance that Levinas describes as ethical. It is this resistance, this point of exteriority to the appropriative movement of philosophical conceptuality, that Levinas seeks to describe in his work. In *Totality and Infinity*, such a point of exteriority is located in the face of the other, but this exteriority is still expressed in the language of ontology, as when Levinas writes that 'Being is exteriority' (TI 290). Thus, in Heideggerian terms, the meaning of the Being of beings, the basic question of metaphysics, is determined as exteriority. The contradiction, where that which is meant to escape ontology is still expressed in ontological language, was powerfully pointed out by Derrida in 'Violence and Metaphysics'. He argued that the attempt to leave the climate of Heidegger's thinking was doomed from the start because Levinas still employs Heideggerian categories in the attempt to exceed those categories. Derrida extended the same argument to Levinas's critique of Hegel and Husserl. Levinas confessed that he had been 'tormented' by Derrida's questions in 'Violence and Metaphysics'.³¹ Accepting Derrida's point, Levinas writes in 'Signature' that 'The ontological language which is still used in *Totality and Infinity* in order to exclude a purely psychological signification of the proposed analyses is henceforth avoided' (DF 295). Again, in an interview with some English graduate students, published in 1988, Levinas reiterates the point, '*Totality and Infinity* was my first book. I find it very difficult to tell you, in a few words, in what way it is different from what I've said afterwards. There is the ontological terminology. I have since tried to get away from that language' (PM 171).

In his second major philosophical book, from 1974, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas tries to avoid this problem of ontological language, in a sinuous self-critique, by coining the distinction between the saying and the said (*le dire et le dit*). The conception of language at work in this book and elsewhere is discussed below by John Llewelyn and Edith Wyschogrod. Crudely stated, the saying is ethical and the said is ontological. Although Levinas can

hardly be said to offer dictionary definitions of these terms, we might say that the saying is my exposure – both corporeal and sensible – to the other person, my inability to resist the other's approach. It is the performative stating, proposing or expressive position of myself facing the other. It is a verbal and possibly also non-verbal ethical performance, of which the essence cannot be captured in constative propositions. It is, if you will, a performative *doing* that cannot be reduced to a propositional description. By contrast, the said is a statement, assertion or proposition of which the truth or falsity can be ascertained. To put it another way, one might say that the content of my words, their identifiable meaning, is the said, while the saying consists in the fact that these words are being addressed to an interlocutor, at this moment each of you. The saying is a non-thematizable ethical residue of language that escapes comprehension, interrupts ontology and is the very enactment of the movement from the same to the other.

Given that philosophy as ontology speaks the language of the said – it is propositional, it fills papers, chapters and books such as this one – the methodological problem facing the later Levinas, and which haunts every page of the rather baroque prose of *Otherwise than Being*, is the following: how is the saying to be said? That is, how is my ethical exposure to the other to be given a philosophical exposition that does not utterly betray this saying? In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas's thinking and, more especially his style of writing, become increasingly sensitive to the problem of how the ethical saying is to be conceptualized – and necessarily betrayed – within the ontological said. One might call this Levinas's deconstructive turn.

The solution to this methodological problem is found, I would suggest, in a notion of *reduction*. In brief, it is a question of exploring the ways in which the said can be unsaid, or reduced, thereby letting the saying circulate as a residue or interruption within the said. The philosopher's effort, Levinas claims, consists in the reduction of the said to the saying and the continual disruption of the limit that separates the ethical from the ontological (*OB* 43–5). Ethics is not, as it perhaps seemed in *Totality and Infinity*, the overcoming or simple abandonment of ontology through the immediacy of ethical experience. It is rather the persistent deconstruction of the limits of ontology and its claim to conceptual mastery, while also recognizing the unavailability of the Said. *Traduire, c'est trahir* (to translate

is to betray) as Levinas was fond of pointing out, but the translation of the saying into the said is a necessary betrayal. So, whereas *Totality and Infinity* powerfully articulates the non-ontological experience of the face of the other in the language of ontology, *Otherwise than Being* is a performative disruption of the language of ontology, which attempts to maintain the interruption of the ethical saying within the ontological said. Whereas *Totality and Infinity* writes about ethics, *Otherwise than Being* is the performative enactment of an ethical writing which endlessly runs up against the limits of language. This puts me in mind of the following remark from Wittgenstein's 1929 'Lecture on Ethics': 'I can only describe my feeling by the metaphor, that, if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world.'³² Reading the tortuously beautiful, rhapsodic incantations of *Otherwise than Being*, one sometimes wonders whether it is Levinas's attempt to write such a book. For Wittgenstein, human beings feel the urge to run up against the limits of language, and such an urge has an ethical point. It reveals that the ethical saying is nothing that can be said propositionally and that ethics cannot be put into words. Strictly speaking, ethical discourse is nonsense, but it is serious nonsense.

So, with what his great friend Blanchot sees as a continual refinement of reflection on the possibilities of philosophical language, Levinas gives expression to the primacy of ethics, that is, the primacy of the interhuman relationship, 'an irreducible structure upon which all other structures rest' (TI 79).³³ For Levinas, excepting what he calls certain *instants merveilleux* in the history of philosophy, notably the Good beyond Being in Plato and the idea of infinity in Descartes, it is ethics that has been dissimulated within the philosophical tradition. Philosophy is not, as Heidegger maintained, a forgetfulness of Being, as much as a forgetfulness of the other. Hence, the fundamental question for philosophy is not Hamlet's 'To be or not to be', or Heidegger's 'Why are there beings at all and why not rather nothing?', but rather 'How does Being justify itself?' (LR 86).³⁴

WHO IS THE SUBJECT?

Against Heidegger, but also against structuralists like Levi-Strauss and anti-humanists like Foucault and Deleuze, Levinas presents his

work as a defence of subjectivity (TI 26). What is this Levinasian conception of subjectivity? As Robert Bernasconi shows in his contribution below, subjectivity is a central and constant theme in Levinas's work. In his first post-war writings, *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, Levinas describes the advent of the subject out of the impersonal neutrality of what he calls the *il y a*, the anonymous rumbling of existence, the sheer 'there is' of the night of insomnia. However, staying with *Otherwise than Being*, another innovation of the latter work is that whereas *Totality and Infinity* describes ethics as a relation to the other, *Otherwise than Being* describes the structure of ethical subjectivity that is disposed towards the other, what Levinas calls 'the other within the same'.

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas begins his exposition by describing the movement from Husserlian intentional consciousness to a level of preconscious sensing or sentience, a movement enacted in the title of the second chapter: 'From Intentionality to Sensing'. As we saw above, from the time of his doctoral thesis on Husserl, Levinas had been critical of the primacy of intentional consciousness, claiming that the latter was theoreticist, where the subject maintains an objectifying relation to the world mediated through representation. The worldly object is the *noema* of a *noesis*. Such is Husserl's intellectualism. Now, in a gesture that remains faithful to Heidegger's ontological undermining of the theoretical compartment toward the world, what he calls the present-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*), the movement from intentionality or sensing, or, in the terms of *Totality and Infinity*, from representation to enjoyment, shows how intentional consciousness is, to put it simply, conditioned by *life*. Life is sentience, enjoyment and nourishment. It is *jouissance* and *joie de vivre*. It is a life that lives from (*vivre de*) the elements: 'we live from good soup, air, light, spectacles, work, sleep, etc. These are not objects of representations' (TI 110). Life, for Levinas, is love of life and love of what life lives from: the sensible, material world. I would argue that Levinas's work offers a material phenomenology of subjective life, where the conscious ego of representation is reduced to the sentient self of enjoyment. The self-conscious subject of intentionality is reduced to a living subject that is subject to the conditions of its existence. Now, for Levinas, it is precisely this self of enjoyment that is capable of being claimed or called into question ethically by the other person. As we

have seen, Levinasian ethics is simply this calling into question of myself – of my spontaneity, of my *jouissance*, of my freedom – by the other. The ethical relation takes place at the level of sensibility, not at the level of consciousness. The Levinasian ethical subject is a sensible subject, not a conscious subject.

For Levinas, the subject is subject, as it were, and the form that this subjection assumes is that of sensibility or sentience. Sensibility is what Levinas calls ‘the way’ of my subjection. This is a sentient vulnerability or passivity towards the other that takes place ‘on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves’ (*OB* 15). The entire phenomenological thrust of *Otherwise than Being* is to found intentionality in sensibility (ch. 2) and to describe sensibility as a proximity to the other (ch. 3), a proximity whose basis is found in what Levinas calls substitution (ch. 4, what Levinas describes as ‘the centrepiece’ of the book). The ethical subject is an embodied being of flesh and blood, a being that is capable of hunger, who eats and enjoys eating. As Levinas writes, ‘only a being that eats can be for the other’ (*OB* 74). That is, only such a being can know what it means to give its bread to the other from out of its own mouth. In what must be the world’s shortest refutation of Heidegger, Levinas complains that *Dasein* is never hungry, and the same might be said of all the various heirs to the *res cogitans*. As Levinas wittily puts it, ‘The need for food does not have existence as its goal, but food’ (*TI* 134).

Levinasian ethics is not therefore an obligation toward the other mediated through the formal and procedural universalization of maxims or some appeal to good conscience. Rather, and this is what is truly provocative about Levinas, ethics is *lived* in the sensibility of an embodied exposure to the other. It is because the self is sensible, that is to say, vulnerable, passive, open to the pangs of both hunger and eros, that it is worthy of ethics. Levinas’s phenomenological claim, in the sense of intentional analysis clarified above, is that the deep structure of subjective experience, what Levinas calls the ‘psychism’, is structured in a relation of responsibility or, better, responsivity to the other. This deep structure, what Levinas calls the ‘psychism’ and what other traditions might call the ‘soul’, is the other within the same, in spite of me, calling me to respond.

Who, then, is the subject? It is *me* and nobody else. As Dostoevsky’s underground man complains, I am not an instance of some general concept or genus of the human being: an ego,